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Protea - Care Guide

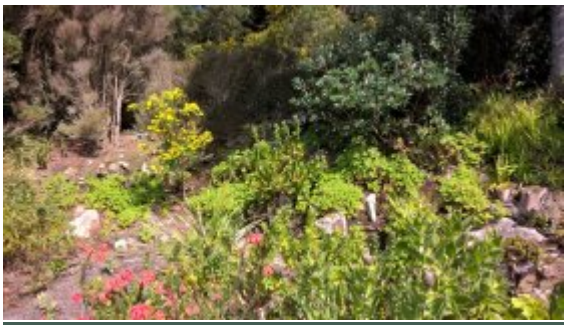
Introduction

Over the last 10-15 years more and more gardeners in Southern England, and especially along the Channel coastline, have gained confidence to try growing South African proteas outside. Previously only gardeners on the Isles of Scilly or in West Cornwall would have been so bold as to try these exotic plants. However after two cold winters many of those who were brave enough to try have now lost their plants. It may therefore be time to take stock of the best ways of growing these lovely South African plants both in the greenhouse and, in certain carefully chosen situations, outside.

All proteas require extremely well drained soil which is both acidic and very low in nutrients (i.e. fertiliser containing phosphates kills them). Exactly the soil conditions which you might find in Tresco Abbey Gardens on the Isles of Scilly but not really the conditions you would find in most gardens except perhaps those very near the sea. Proteas need full sun on a steep south facing slope in an open (i.e. unshaded) position. It is often possible to create rockeries on south facing coastal slopes which do provide these sorts of conditions and here proteas will grow well.

For those who do not have a sloping garden you can achieve the same effect by planting proteas on raised mounds and adding bark and grit to improve drainage.

Proteas will quickly die if their roots sit in waterlogged or wet ground for long periods in areas of high rainfall.



Proteas like dry environments and actively dislike the stagnant humid conditions which are created in many greenhouses. They are therefore likely to do better in conservatories which have a glass roof (i.e. full light) but are heated as part of the house. In both cases good ventilation and air circulation is essential.

Plants should be kept on the dry side and only watered when the top 2 inches of compost has dried out. Never water the leaves; only the pot or soil itself. However proteas are not like cacti which can be allowed to dry out completely with no ill effect. They do need regular watering in pots and they do always need to be moist to survive.

If proteas are grown in pots add crocks or pieces of polystyrene to the bottom of the pots to improve drainage. To mix your own protea compost you need to ensure it is well drained and acidic. A mixture of peat, bark, grit and polystyrene beads is ideal but not essential. The essential bit is that the compost in your pot or greenhouse bed is well drained.

Frost Protection

The more common and tested proteas listed in the Burncoose mail order catalogue will tolerate up to ·5° Centigrade of frost. Some may well tolerate even more frost once they are properly established and providing they are sheltered from the wind and salt laden gales.

We have found that our Leucodendrons especially are tolerant of the most cold with proteas coming second and banksias third.

Horticultural fleece should always be used to protect young plants for the first two years in frosty periods. In extreme cold spells such as those seen in the last two winters fleece protection may well be needed for long periods.

Protea cold damage

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In the main feeding is not necessary providing you keep potting your protea on regularly each year with fresh compost. Any fertiliser containing phosphates is dangerous but there are slow release (8-10 month) granular fertilisers which can be used. However most pre- mixed acidic composts will already contain slow release fertiliser.

Pruning

In general don’t unless you particularly need to shape up your plant or to remove damaged stems. Proteas can be cut back to the base and will re-

grow perfectly well. However this is advisable only if the leaves of the plant have been frosted and then quick action is needed to encourage the plant to reshoot.

Conclusion

Although growing proteas is a challenge (especially during cold winters) if you stick to these basic rules you can still enjoy these exotic flowering shrubs at least in your greenhouse or conservatory and perhaps even outside in the milder coastal counties of England.

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